(illustration)

# In the Jungles of Central and Southern Laos

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# Washington's Air War

The dim glow of the kerosene lamp won back a small lighted space from the endless semi-darkness of the cavern. The grotto beneath the gigantic one hundred meter stone boulder serves simultaneously as a refuge and a living space. Here is one's routine in life. Quiet now, it is possible to feast one's eyes through the broad apertures upon a quaint mountain landscape. Since the start of the latest air raids, all the inhabitants are retiring by way of the gloomy rock passageway to the humid interior of the cavern, where the light and the sound of battle cannot penetrate. In the sixth year of the war hundreds of thousands of Laotians live in such conditions. However it is not what it seems. This is a special cavern. The cavern's peculiarity is the work of "cave architecture", which has sprung up quite recently in the bleak war time conditions.

This is a kind of experiment. In 1968, under a decision of the TSK PFL {Central Committee of the Laotian Patriotic Front], a special composite construction brigade was established. They are occupied, as well as conditions permit, in preparing well built, "multi-level mountain buildings." Demolition experts start the work and carpenters, joiners and painters complete it. We were already able to visit large "well-built mountain skyscrapers" -a military hospital, quarters, of the central organizations of the PFL. Our cavern was called the Hotel "Friendship". April 1969, the date of opening, was written on the walls. We, the delegation of the Union of journalists of the USSR - I. Loboda of Izvestiya, a Kievian from RATAU [Ukrainian News Agency] V. Eremenko, and myself - the first permanent members of the delegation. Here in the cavern there is a restaurant, a movie theater, a living area separating one from another by curtains, and a safe bomb shelter in the depths of the cavern. But even here through the apertures of the cavern the caustic smoke of something burning penetrates, a reminder that tragedy is commonplace for these places.

A half-hour ago we heard the far off sound of aircraft engines. Without even peering into the foggy horizon, our Laotian escort Suktavong determined: "AD-6 from an aircraft carrier of the American Seventh Fleet. You need to be careful with him. He is most often used as a controller. He spots the targets and then calls the fighter-bombers." At high altitude a Naval Scout makes one sinister circle after another, he doesn't disappear from our field of vision behind the ridge, in whose depths our grotto is located. In a few seconds a fallen bomb explodes approximately 300 meters directly in front of us along side of the inhabited cavern. Thick, black streaks of fire and smoke swiftly began to crawl in various directions and then roll up into large, low, mushroom clouds over the valley. Cries for help are heard from the neighboring cavern, but anti-personnel bombs cover them up. A fatal whirlwind raged for about 20 minutes. "The Yanks" dropped 8 containers- nearly 900 thousand flying steel fragments in a small clearing with a radius of 300-400 meters. Hugging the humid rock wall of the cavern we silently observed one more bandit raid. Only after half an hour were they finally able to bring down the flames and get rid of the evidence of the raid. No one was injured in our grotto. Only the "Gazinki"[Lorries] which were hidden in the bushes were punctured by fragments.

This time the criminals left unpunished, but the people's retribution is catching up with them more frequently. I happened to have the occasion to meet with

several of the pilots who were taken prisoner in northern Laos and to hear their confessions. Here is one of these meetings.

In the middle of the cavern there is a long table. On it are small porcelain cups with fragrant green tea, dishes of candy and three kerosene lamps. At the table there are about fifteen people. Several managed to take off their Brownings and Colts, hanging them on the crossbeam alongside the table. The others placed their weapons on the back of the benches.

The short Laotian is addressing those gathered:

-Comrades, friends, brothers! Allow me to open the press conference, organized by the departments of propaganda and agitation of the TSK PFL. At this conference we will discuss the new measures being taken by the USA to broaden the armed intervention in our country and will get to know

an American pilot, who was shot down over Laos. I give the floor to Sisan Sisane, a member of the TSK PFL.

We do not intend to have the same sort of press conference - he says. Therefore, today I would like to briefly give a general overview of the situation.

Those who are present know about the situation that has developed in Laos over the past several years. Since the first days of peace and afterwards, the days of war, we witnessed for ourselves the rapidly developing events. More than once, fate has taken us with several of the correspondents who are sitting here, on the front lines of Laos. More than once we have been bombed and shared the last bowl of rice in the gray dismal caves. Almost all have come here from the regions near the front, going tens and even hundreds of kilometers on broken and eroded roads.

In a few minutes we will hear from an American pilot shot down in this region. His name is Dehvid Luis Khrdlika. He is a Captain in the United States Air Force. He flew from the American base in Tahkli in neighboring Thailand. He was the lead aircraft in a group of three jet-powered F-105 fighter bombers. Having bombed a marked objective, right here in the province of Sam-Nea, Khrdlicka was shot down by an anti-aircraft battery while en route home. This was the fourth and final combat mission for the American Captain. "I admit, -the voice of the pilot was heard in the entire cavern, - that I took part in the aggression against the peaceful Laotian people, who are carrying on a just struggle. While a prisoner I was given modern medical treatment. I have been well treated. I ask for forgiveness..." The son of a Czech immigrant who abandoned his native land in the search of good fortune, became a mercenary and war criminal.

The article on Dehvid Luis Khrdlicka and his prison mates was published in Pravda along with a photograph. Several months later I received a letter from California. Mrs. Dzheyms Dzh. Ehvans wrote, that on the advice from friends, she found Pravda where the article was written. In the newspaper photograph she saw a man who looked much like her husband. He too was a military pilot who bombed Laos and did not return from one of his missions. She asked for help to clear up the fate of her husband. Is he alive or dead? "Maybe, - inquired Mrs. Ehvans, - you confused the photograph. If this is not him, maybe you met my husband. Maybe some European was detained several years in the dark caves?"

Representatives from the Pathet-Lao reported to me that they don't know anything about Mr. Ehvans. Possibly he died in the crash. I am now writing my response to Alameda,

California. I am reporting that I don't know anything about her husband, I am telling her about Washington's "secret war" against Laos.

The widows of America should know with what their husbands were and are involved in Laos, you know they are hiding the truth...

In January 1966 the Pentagon confirmed for the first time a report that two American military planes had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Laos. However, it was stressed that they were allegedly "completing a reconnaissance mission." In May of the same year, an official representative of the Pentagon reported that in the past two years eleven military servicemen were killed and about twenty were missing in action in Laos. In August a newer, more precise definition was given: "Since May of

1964, when American aviation started reconnaissance flights over Laotian territory, thirty American military servicemen have died." Only in the summer of 1967 did several Pentagon Generals make a partial admission that the United States Air Force has been conducting one-man, self-defense raids in Laotian territory since May of 1964.

In the spring of 1969 some very curious documents fell into my hands - The list of 97 American pilots missing in action in Laos. The list gives the first name, last name, military rank, and even the date of their last flight. Although the document was stamped with the seal of the International Red Cross, from entirely reliable sources one could ascertain that the real authors of the document were the special services of the Pentagon. The list opens with Lieutenant Dzh. Adam, "missing" 22 May 1968, and Colonel Armstrong, "missing" 9 Nov 1967. Although the list was somewhat "obsolete"(it was created in the fall of 1968) and far from complete, it is possible to get a clear picture of the escalation of the war. In 1965 the number of "missings" was thirteen, in 1968 more than 30. However, in the summer of 1969 American diplomats in Vientiane were already unofficially talking about more the 200 American pilots, who were "missing in action" during missions over the Liberated regions.

On 17 May 1969 warring Laos celebrated the fifth anniversary since the beginning of armed resistance against the American aggressors. Towards the evening of that daya representative of the Commander in Chief's Headquarters arrived at our place in the cave "hotel" and gave the latest battle report: 1127 American airplanes and helicopters were shot down over the Liberated region.

Representatives of the Main Staff reported that many American pilots were unable to eject from their airplanes. If the Pentagon receives confirmation of their deaths, then the dead are automatically included in the total number of losses in Vietnam. Moreover, in the mountainous, hard to reach, sparsely populated regions of Laos special U.S. helicopter rescue detachments are successful in "fishing out" the majority of the pilots who survived. The rest of those who remain captive in the gray caves are awaiting the end of the war and the decision on their fate.

But they will have to answer for the robbery. At the end of 1968 a commission was formed in the Liberated regions to expose the crime of the American imperialists. Here are some facts it collected. In 1966, United States air forces conducted 20 thousand combat sorties over the Liberated regions, in 1967 more than 29 thousand. In the first half

of 1969 by data of American writers, the number quadrupled in comparison to 1967.

The results of this illegal war are monstrous. Nearly all of the cities and large population centers in the Liberated territory are destroyed. Hundreds of thousands were forced to relocate to the jungles and caverns.

However, the Pentagon was obviously not pleased with the events. American military specialists calculated, that for 1968 alone, the war had cost the round sum of - one billion dollars, and 83 percent of the equipment did not result in losses inflicted on the enemy. The United States

Air Force Command's excuse cited data on the sharp increase of power and effectiveness of anti-aircraft activity of the patriotic armed forces. All of this is secret. The monstrous facts of the "secret war" are used in the development of new adventurous plans.

In the sixth year of the war, the Pentagon is forced to acknowledge their helplessness. The strategy of "undermining the economy" as well as the numerous attempts to expand the large offensive operations of the right wing crack troops against the patriots collapsed.